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ABSTRACT

Six eclectic basal readers were evaluated to determine what basal readiness programs are teaching kindergarten and early first grade children. Each lesson was analyzed to discover the main purpose of instruction as stated in an objective or skill and the actual requirements placed upon the child during instruction. Using the recommendations from "Becoming a Nation of Readers" (Anderson, 1984), lessons and objectives were categorized as either positive program aspects--oral language and listening, letter recognition, sound/symbol association and sight vocabulary, and writing experiences--or negative aspects--fine motor skills; colors, shapes, and numbers; excessive handwriting; and perceptual training. Analysis revealed that while some series included only a few or no negative program aspects, they had overemphasized one aspect, especially letter recognition and sound/symbol associations. All programs lacked a balance among positive aspects. The following recommendations are based on this analysis: (1) basal reading readiness programs should include writing experiences, (2) oral language activities should be used to a larger degree, (3) listening comprehension development should be a major part of reading readiness programs, and (4) metalanguage should be taught through such informal methods as labeling objects in the classroom and continually exposing children to print. (HOD)

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BASAL READING READINESS PROGRAMS:

WHAT ARE THEY REALLY TEACHING

by

MARIA J. WEISS, PH.D.

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Introduction

Reading readiness instruction has long been an area of curriculum controversy and concern in the United States. Although not formally recognized until the 1930's as a needed area of instruction, a variety of reading readiness programs have been advocated which range from a policy of withholding instruction until a child reached the mental age of 6.5 years (Morphett and Washburne 1931), to Frostig's visual-perceptual training (Jacobs, et.al. 1968) and Delacato's crawling exercises (Stone and Pielsrick 1969), to preparing children to read from birth (Glazer 1980).

Fifty years after the term "reading readiness" became a part of the classroom teacher's venacular (Harrison 1936) we are still wrestling with such basic questions as: "When should reading instruction begin?", "What should be included in the reading readiness curriculum?" and "What are the best methods for instruction?"

The answers to these questions are intertwined, although on a national basis, we have apparently answered the first question. That is, most children are accepted into first grade at the age of six. Consequently, based on the child's chronological age, a child is deemed ready to read since formal reading instruction usually starts in this grade. There is substantial evidence which shows that some children are able to learn to read before reaching the age of six (Durkin 1966). What appears to be the case, however, is not the age of the child but rather the "kind and quality of instruction that is offered" (Durkin 1970 p. 93).

Basal Readiness Programs

It is a well known fact that basal reading programs are widely used throughout the United States. Estimates that over 95% of primary teachers use basal readers in their instruction almost every day have been cited (Spache and Spache 1986). Since there is a tendency for school districts to adopt an entire reading series for the elementary grades, the wide use of the reading readiness components of the basal programs is also evident. What are these programs teaching our kindergarten and early first grade children?

The Commission on Reading

Before answering this question, it seems appropriate to establish criteria for evaluating the reading readiness component of basal programs. The Commission on Reading (Anderson, 1984) recently presented a set of criteria which have been applied here (Table 1).

In addition, the Commission's recommendations were also expanded to include: the use of children's literature to facilitate oral language development; the inclusion of listening comprehension development in kindergarten programs since it is an excellent predictor of reading comprehension success; and the teaching of letter names and sound/symbol associations.

Several commonplace instructional practices were also cited by the Commission as having negligible relationships with learning to read. Included here are such activities as learning the names of colors, shapes, and numbers, eye-hand coordination skills and perceptual training. In many instances, perceptual training tasks such as tracing shapes and finding hidden objects in pictures may be more difficult than actually learning to read.

Basal Evaluations

To answer the question, "What are basal reading readiness programs really teaching?" an evaluation of six eclectic basals was made. This evaluation resulted from an analysis of the main purpose for each lesson to be taught as stated in an objective or skill. The primary focus of the analysis was the actual requirements placed upon the child during instruction. Several of the basals had more than one book as part of the readiness program to consider for evaluation.

Using the recommendation from Becoming A Nation of Readers (Anderson, 1984), lessons and objectives were categorized as either positive or negative program aspects. The positive aspects were: oral language and listening comprehension; letter recognition, sound/symbol association and sight vocabulary; and writing experiences. The negative aspects were: fine motor skills; colors, shapes, and numbers; excessive handwriting; and perceptual training. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2.

It appears from the data presented that there is room for improvement in the reading readiness components of these six basal readers. While some series include only a few or no negative program aspects, they may, at the same time, overemphasize one aspect, especially letter recognition and sound/symbol associations. What is missing from all programs is a balance among positive program aspects.

Recomendations

The one positive program aspect that is totally ignored by basal reading readiness programs is writing experiences. Principals and reading specialists must encourage kindergarten and first grade teachers to allow children to experiment with writing. Failure to correctly form the letter "p" should not be

confused with any dimension of reading failure. Recent research has shown that when children are given the opportunity to write freely, without the confines of conventional orthography, language facility is greatly enhanced (Heald-Taylor 1984). "Scribbling" then takes on important status in the kindergarten or first grade classroom. Other experimentation with writing can be encouraged through the use of the typewriter and magnetic board letters. At an early age, children can develop important concepts about print such as the functions of spacing, the use of punctuation, and formation of words (Clay 1979; Combs 1984).

Another recommendation is to include oral language development to a larger degree than most basal programs presently employ. Kindergarten and first grade teachers may already be doing this through other content areas, especially science and social studies. However, the connections between the words children speak and the words they will read must be made clearer to these youngsters.

Perhaps the best way to accomplish this is to use the language experience approach to reading. Publishers of basal readers have avoided this technique because it is not a method that can be easily packaged and sold. In the language experience approach, language is generated by the child, not the workbook. It also allows the child to see that reading and writing are interrelated and that the main purpose of both is to convey meaning.

Listening comprehension development goes hand in hand with oral language development. Because of the strong ties between reading and listening, listening comprehension should be a large part of the reading readiness programs. Children can learn sentence structure and story structure through listening to good children's books that are read to them daily. Children can also learn prediction skills necessary in reading through such exercises as listening to a sentence or short story and then supplying the omitted word.

Houghton Mifflin's readiness program does do this in fourteen lessons called "spoken context". Unfortunately, the series does not include enough of these lessons.

A final recommendation involves the vocabulary teachers use to discuss language called metalanguage. As evidenced here through the evaluation of the basal reading readiness programs, a considerable amount of instructional time is spent teaching young children about sound/symbol associations. This instruction often preceeds children's full understanding of the concept of "word". These sound/symbol associations often "have little if any productive application to anything else that the children are doing" (Templeton 1986 p. 407). Principals and reading specialists must encourage classroom teachers to help children learn about metalanguage through such informal methods as labeling objects in the classroom and a continual bombardment of print throughout the kindergarten and first grade curriculum. Here again, by including writing experimentation in the reading readiness programs, teachers will also aid in the development of metalanguage.

Conclusion

Basal reading readiness programs do not provide a complete and balanced program for young children. The major aspects that are lacking to some degree in published programs are oral language development, listening comprehension and writing experiences. It is, therefore, up to those responsible for improving instruction to recognize the shortfalls of these programs and supplement accordingly. The major strength of these basal programs lies in the teaching of letter recognition and sound/symbol associations. However, by only using such a program, young children are being cheated of knowing what reading is really all about: deriving meaning from print.

TABLE 1

READING READINESS RECOMMENDATIONS FROM

BECOMING A NATION OF READERS

1. Kindergarten programs should emphasize oral language and writing as well as the beginning steps in reading.
2. Kindergarten programs in reading should be balanced to include both formal and informal approaches.
3. The learning environment must be rich in experiences with written language.
4. Children need to learn about the functions of written language (entertain, inform, direct).
5. Writing experiences in kindergarten should not over emphasize handwriting practice.

TABLE 2

Analysis of Basal Reading Readiness Programs
(Percentage of lessons or objectives reported)

	Positive Aspects				Negative Aspects				
	Oral Lang./Listening Comp.	Letter Recog.-Sound/Symbol	Writing	Other	Fine Motor	Colors/Shapes/Numbers	Handwriting	Perceptual Training	Other
Addison Wesley (1982)	25.0	7.2	0	4.8	23.8	21.4	0	16.7	1.2
Ginn (1982) K	28.7	58.5	0	0	0	12.8	*	**	0
Ginn (1982) R	8.8	91.2	0	0	0	0	*	0	0
Harcourt Brace (1983) R^1_2	28.2	20.5	0	1.3	0	14.1	6.4	29.5	0
Harcourt Brace (1983) R^2	4.8	87.0	0	0	0	1.6	19.4	0	0
Houghton Mifflin (1983)	10.9	89.1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Macmillian (1983) K^1_2	61.4	18.2	0	0	0	13.6	*	6.8	0
Macmillian (1983) K^2	29.3	65.3	0	0	0	5.3	8.6	0	0
Macmillian (1983) R	23.9	73.2	0	0	0	7.0	73.2	0	0
Economy (1986) K	18.0	27.3	0	0	0	15,6	*	39.1	0
Economy (1986) R	25.4	52.2	0	0	0	7.5	0	14.9	0

*Part of letter recognition in excess
**Tracing letters

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